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## Exchange networks and free shops in Berlin: gifts and commodities in 'alternative' consumption experiences

*Redes de intercâmbio e lojas gratuitas em Berlim: dádiva e mercadoria em experiências "alternativas" de consumo*

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### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etnografica/1216>

DOI: 10.4000/etnografica.1216

ISSN: 2182-2891

### Publisher

Centro em Rede de Investigação em Antropologia

### Printed version

Date of publication: 2 May 2009

Number of pages: 49-75

ISSN: 0873-6561

### Electronic reference

Irene Sabaté Muriel, « Exchange networks and free shops in Berlin: gifts and commodities in 'alternative' consumption experiences », *Etnográfica* [Online], vol. 13 (1) | 2009, Online since 16 May 2012, connection on 25 February 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etnografica/1216> ; DOI : 10.4000/etnografica.1216

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# Exchange networks and free shops in Berlin: gifts and commodities in ‘alternative’ consumption experiences<sup>1</sup>

*Irene Sabaté Muriel*

This paper is based on an ethnography of ‘alternative’ consumption practices in the inner city of the former East Berlin. Non-monetary exchange networks (*Tauschringe*) and ‘free shops’ (*Umsonstläden*) have been examined. In *Umsonstläden*, the contemporary ideology of the ‘pure’ gift (Parry 1986; Carrier 1995) is at play: objects are freely given and totally alienated from their owners. In turn, *Tauschringe* sometimes induce gift-giving practices entailing mutual obligation, as a result of frequent exchanges which bring participants socially closer. The ethnographic material I present challenges the suitability of a conceptual gift/commodity divide to examine these experiences, provided that different modalities of gift-giving are articulated with commoditisation trends. Considering this complexity, I propose a re-examination of the role of the gift in ‘alternative’ consumption practices promoted by social movements in Berlin.

KEYWORDS: economic anthropology, gifts/commodities, exchange networks, ‘free shops’, consumption, social economy, social movements, Berlin.

With the slogan ‘there we go without dough’, we meet and exchange our abilities and our goods. It works like this: Karl helps Elfriede with the shopping, Elfriede takes out Yvonne’s dog for a walk at noon, Yvonne cuts Karl’s hair. The circle is closed. We do not only want to exchange, but also to weave new contacts, to chat about everything possible (Friedrichshainer Tauschring’s leaflet, Berlin, 2005, translated from German).

In a society in which all things become products and their exchange is only organized via money, in which bank accounts decide what chances someone has to live, we want to develop a radical alternative: no money, no

1 This article is based on fieldwork carried out for the author’s MA dissertation (Sabaté 2006) on ‘heterodox’ consumption practices in East Berlin. This research has been funded by means of a predoctoral grant (FI) from the Catalan Government and by the Spanish Ministry of Education (projects BSO2003-06832 and SEJ2007-66633). It also owes much to the reviewers’ comments on two previous versions and to Dr. Susana Narotzky’s orientations.

products, no sale and no exchange (Umsonstladen Mitte's leaflet, Berlin, 2005, original in English).

THESE QUOTATIONS HAVE BEEN TAKEN FROM THE TWO DOCUMENTS through which a non-monetary exchange network (*Tauschring*) and a 'free shop' (*Umsonstladen*) announce their purposes in East Berlin. As it can be noted, both initiatives propose some kind of alternative to market circulation and consumption. But, what does their aspiration at escaping commodification forces entail? In which sense can they be said to be located outside the market sphere? What is the specific nature of each alternative? Can these complex economic realities be analysed unproblematically by applying the anthropological *gift* and *commodity* notions? To answer these questions, a re-examination of the role of the gift in these conscious attempts at de-commodifying consumption practices will be proposed.

#### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: THE ARTICULATION OF GIFT-GIVING AND COMMODITY EXCHANGE

In a controversial book, Gregory (1982) compared the economies of clan-based and class-based societies. The exchange of gifts was pre-eminent in the former, whereas the latter depended on the circulation of commodities. In his own interpretation of the theory of Mauss, he went on to define gifts as 'inalienable objects exchanged between interdependent persons', and commodities as 'alienable objects exchanged between independent persons' (1982: 41). This divide was connected to further dichotomies: inalienability and alienability, personification and objectification, use and exchange value, dependence and independence of transactors, quality and quantity, maximisation of outgoings and maximisation of incomings, etc. (1982: 41-55).

Even if, in fact, Gregory has ethnographically described more ambiguous situations, such as the emergence of gift-giving in commodified contexts (1982: 166; 1997: 46, 56), many authors have criticised his dichotomical point of view for leading to a reification of the primitive/modern divide. Thus, Davis (1973: 153-154),<sup>2</sup> Thomas (1991) and Carrier (1995), have noted the need to qualify a strong correspondence of the gift and commodity notions and an essentialist opposition between a 'giving-and-receiving other' (pre-capitalist, traditional) and a 'buying-and-selling us' (capitalist, modern).

2 Davis' theory of exchange (1973) proposes an alternative classification of transaction patterns based on the norms governing it, which focus on rewards, costs and status. The result is a complex classification in nine categories. For Davis, these categories help to explain the diversity of economies, but no economy is based in a single category. Rather, they differ in the way they combine exchange norms.

Thomas' approach (1991) does not entail a denial of the gift and commodity theoretical notions as pertinent ones. Rather, he intends to understand their articulation in the context of colonial history and politics (1991: 3), and also 'to demonstrate their coexistence in particular economies and the impossibility of speaking generally of gift or commodity economies or societies' (1991: 33).

Thus, we can find in every society objects 'that can only be given at certain times', objects 'that can be sold anywhere to anyone', and also objects 'that it is improper to sell or give away'<sup>3</sup> (Thomas 1991: 18). Similar contingences are noted by Godelier (2004). Moreover, *not everything that we buy and sell is a pure commodity* (Carrier 1995: 29), and 'not all that we give and receive is a pure gift' (Laidlaw 2000: 632).

Classic anthropologists such as Malinowski (2001 [1922]) have been accused of applying the norm of reciprocity in too universalistic a way (Weiner 1992: 2, 17, 149) and overstating the distance between the capitalist West and the so-called primitive economies (Weiner 1992: 154; Thomas 1991: 206). However, these anthropologists did not deny that the societies they observed sometimes exchanged objects in a balanced manner and with immediate compensation, though it only happened in narrowly defined circumstances. Malinowski himself described barter practices (*gimwali*) among the Trobrianders as being marginal and lacking the social prestige attributed to other circulation forms such as the *kula* (Malinowski 2001: 339). Thus, market-like exchange could be a sporadic practice coexisting with gift-giving.

Only under certain historical circumstances, with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century blooming of capitalism in Europe and North America, the liberal aspiration of setting up a self-regulating market system became hegemonic (Polanyi 2001 [1944]). This made the market logic prevail and gave rise to a market economy (Polanyi 1994 [1977]: 81). The origins of this unprecedented spread of the market rule had already been described by Marx and Simmel among others.<sup>4</sup> The evaluation of its consequences has greatly varied: from the destruction of social solidarities and the withdrawal of morality to the attainment of individual freedom and a better living standard (Parry and Bloch 1989: 30; Gudeman 2001: 10).

Nevertheless, not only the pre-eminence of gift-giving in pre-capitalist societies, but also a supposed ubiquity of the market rule in the contemporary West needs to be carefully considered and questioned (Godelier 2004: 196). Many ethnographies have showed that gift-giving behaviour, together with other kinds of non-monetary transactions (Parry and Bloch 1989), can also

3 Weiner's analysis (1992) focuses on this third category, neglected by Malinowski (2001), in the Trobriand context.

4 In fact, many authors had postulated analogous transitions from one to the other term of a dichotomy: from use value to exchange value (Aristotle, Marx), from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* (Tönnies), from status to contract (Maine), from substantive to formal rationality (Weber), etc. (Polanyi 1994 [1977]: 122; Gudeman 2001: 16).

be detected in capitalist contexts, and that such practices remain a key everyday strategy for many people, for example in kinship frameworks (Brandon 2000). Traditionally, researchers have focused their attention on gift-giving as a strategy of marginalised people who encounter barriers to access the market, money and the formal economy (Stack 1974; Lomnitz 1975). Nevertheless, it is possible to detect gift-giving patterns in every social stratum of society. For example, it has also been a pervasive strategy in everyday economies under socialism (Berdahl 1997) and even after the transition to capitalism (Dunn 1999; Patino 2002; Humphrey 2002). All this supports Polanyi's denunciation of the 'fallacy of the market' (1994 [1977]: 92-93), an over-simplification consisting in univocally identifying the Western contemporary economy with the capitalist market.

In spite of the trend to equate objects to commodities in contemporary societies, Carrier (1995) underlines the need to consider the specific existence of objects and their bonds to the people who produce, own or consume them; that is to say, the existence of objects in 'private structures' (1995: 8) and the social elements at play in the economy (1995: 193). The spread of industrial capitalism 'has not done away with people's need to have their objects be possessions nor has it abolished the need to transact possessions in personal relationships' (1995: 11).

Carrier understands the Maussian model as a continuum between commodity and gift relations, the first being impersonal and transitory, the second personal and long-lasting. Then he goes on to affirm that objects fitting one of the two poles are rare. However, our society favours an 'ideology of the gift' derived from the segregation of home and work as paradigmatic examples of the social and economic spheres. As a result of this divide, a non-Maussian popular conception of the gift is constructed in the West. Gift-giving is depicted as a free choice, a way to express sincere affection and an action which does not oblige to reciprocate (Carrier 1995: 145).

Parry and Bloch's proposal (1989: 23) to explain the coexistence of different economic logics is partially based on the idea of a multicentric economy, as postulated by Bohannan (1981) or by Kopytoff (1986: 71). However, they intend to go beyond these authors' focus on money and to consider economic systems as a whole. They define two transaction orders: that of commerce and labour work, and that of household reproduction. Both orders are based on different principles (the former on short term, individual acquisition motives, the latter on long-term moral values) and their organic interrelation may entail some degree of conflict. Gudeman (2001: 19) has affirmed the similarity of Bloch and Parry's proposal to his notion of dialectically related community and market realms.<sup>5</sup>

5 We could also add here Carrier's opposition between the cultural realms of home and work (1995: 21).

In the context of long-distance trade and circulation, Appadurai (1986) accounts for the meanings acquired or lost by a circulating object. At different stages of its 'social life', an object's exchangeability is defined by power and meaning relations conforming the 'politics of value'. Consecutively entering and exiting the market, objects experience commodification and de-commodification processes, and therefore 'a commodity is not one kind of thing rather than another, but one phase in the life of some things' (1986: 17).

Kopytoff (1986) shares Appadurai's focus on circulating objects and notes the need to understand their 'cultural biographies'. Commodities can be universally found, as they are defined by its exchangeability and only depend on the existence of the necessary 'exchange technology'. But decommodification is also possible whenever an object becomes priceless and acquires another kind of worth. This is the result of typically cultural processes such as singularization and sacralization.

Following the mentioned authors, in this article, the notions of gift and commodity will be taken as paradigmatic cases rather than as empirical realities. It is assumed that goods and services do not have a fixed identity but they are the products of a continuous re-signification, and that more or less prominent gift- and commodity-like ingredients – such as moral obligation or alienability – need to be investigated at a given time and within their context (Carrier 1995: 192).

#### ETHNOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

During the final years of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the *Innenstadt*<sup>6</sup> of Berlin was an unattractive part of the capital city, due to the bad condition of housing and the proximity of the Wall. But right after *die Wende*,<sup>7</sup> during the early nineties, districts like Mitte, Friedrichshain or Prenzlauer Berg became a centre of attraction for Western young people, many of whom had grown up in the 'alternative' and militant atmosphere of West Berlin. At their arrival, often after squatting a building, these youngsters organised themselves in social, environmental, political and artistic movements. In a short time, the *alternative Szene*, formerly confined in the Western district of Kreuzberg, had spread to the East.

Even if the scope of Berlin's *alternative Szene* has been reduced since the nineties, due to urban redevelopment policies entailing a decreasing availability of spaces and the arrival of better-off population, the *Innenstadt* continues

6 German term for the inner city, which comprises mainly the Eastern quarters of Mitte, Friedrichshain and Prenzlauer Berg.

7 Popular expression to denote the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the unification of Germany in 1990.

to be the area of the city matching the experimental, artistic and 'alternative' image of Berlin. Although a coherent discourse is lacking, the activity of the *alternative Szene* is presented as a critical opposition to hegemonic ideas. Antifascism, anti-sexism, anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism and environmentalism inspire a wide diversity of activities, which are institutionalised as *Projekte* ('projects').

Some *Projekte* deal with the issue of consumption by questioning the model of market provisioning and suggesting some alternative possibilities. Although the cases examined here were originated after the fall of the Wall, such experiences have already a long run within the history of social movements deriving from social economy approaches. A historical account should go back to the socialist experiments carried out during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Western Europe, such as Owen's consumption cooperatives, where goods had a 'natural' value based on human work, and Proudhon's *banques du peuple*, which intended to abolish interest in loans (Grünert 1999). In Germany, Silvio Gesell's *Freiwirtschaftslehre* ('free economy') tried to enhance the role of money as a means of exchange and payment. Accumulation was prevented by establishing a reduction of the value of money if it was kept from circulation for a certain time. Other ephemeral experiments took place in the 1930s in several Austrian and German towns as an attempt to cope with the world economic crisis (Grünert 1999; Pierret 1999). Many of these experiments consisted on the creation of a local currency which should protect its users from inflation. These practices were usually considered as illegal and forbidden by the authorities because transactions in local currencies escaped taxation and delegitimated the national currency. Community currencies reappeared in Germany after the II World War. They were promoted by the authorities as an alternative to other survival strategies such as the black market (Schröder 2006). Later, with the blooming of the Federal Republic of Germany's economy, community currencies disappeared for a while, until the new social movements, some of them inspired by Silvio Gesell's *Freigeld* ('free money') theory, applied it to the self-help experiences that emerged in the late 70s and early 80s. At the same time in the German Democratic Republic, although the gift and the informal economy had acquired a great importance (Berdahl 1997), no attempts to formalise those practices were made (Schröder 2006).

In the early 80s emerged in Canada a new experience known as Local Exchange Trade Systems (LETS). The purpose of its founder, Michael Linton, was to empower communities in difficult socioeconomic circumstances such as high unemployment rates, to enhance economic activity and exchange among local actors and to complement welfare benefits (Bowring 1998). A parallel currency was created in this aim. More or less unchanged, the idea has spread to other English-speaking countries (North 2002) as well as to France (Joly



et Sylvestre 2004; Laacher 2004; Lauraire 2004), Germany (Grünert 1999; Pierret 1999; Schröder 2004; 2006), etc.

In this section on ethnographic findings, the diversity of *Projekte* observed in Berlin will be organised following a classification suggested by an informant.<sup>8</sup> Two emic categories based on *a priori* different circulation patterns have been selected: *Projekte* primarily based on balanced exchange (*tauschen*), and those based on gift-giving (*schenken*). For each category, a paradigmatic case has been identified: non-monetary exchange networks (*Tauschringe*) and ‘free shops’ (*Umsonstläden*) respectively. It is our purpose to check if the gift and commodity anthropological notions are indeed underlying the two empirical realities, as it may seem at first.

### **Projekte based on balanced exchange: the example of Tauschringe**

The first experiences considered here are those based on exchanges in kind (*tauschen*), involving either goods or services. Transactions take place without the mediation of a currency,<sup>9</sup> entailing an immediate compensation – as in barter – or a delayed one. In the case of direct barter, where people reach an agreement to satisfy simultaneously their demands, *Projekte* consist merely in bringing people in contact, for example through an Internet database.<sup>10</sup> But, when a delay is introduced, as it occurs in most cases, a means of exchange is required. These systems allow multi-sided exchanges,<sup>11</sup> which increases the likelihood of successful transactions. Donors may obtain compensation not directly from the first receiver but indirectly from a third person, which sets up the circular (*Ring*) functioning of the system.

The most popular example of *tauschen Projekte* are *Tauschringe* (literally, ‘exchange rings’). The first *Tauschringe* in Germany were created at the beginning of the 90s, and have proliferated much since then.<sup>12</sup> They were partially inspired by LETS experiences, but with a crucial difference: instead of a local

8 ‘Self-provisioning comprises in fact three different sectors. The first, and the most important for me, is self-provisioning by garden cultivation, or agriculture [...]. The second section of self-provisioning is working at home, to do something by oneself, the ‘do-it-yourself’ story. And the third section, which is the least significant in Germany but is perhaps growing, is exchanging [*tauschen*], sharing [*teilen*], renting [*leihen*] and giving [*schenken*]. But in this order, OK? Self-provisioning is for me garden cultivation, self-work and then these other things’ (Wilhelm, 60 years old, self-help activist and unemployed, interview 20-10-2005).

9 We will not offer here a detailed account of community currencies (*Regiogelder*), as they are beyond the scope of this article. It is enough to note that one of these currencies, the ‘Berliner’, can be used in some shops in Prenzlauer Berg. The *Projekt* stresses economic goals such as the activation of a district’s commercial fabric.

10 See, for example, <[www.tauschticket.de](http://www.tauschticket.de)>.

11 This is what Bowring (1998) calls ‘serial reciprocity’.

12 Nowadays there are more than three hundred *Tauschringe* only in Germany ([www.tauschring.de](http://www.tauschring.de)). Twenty-four of them can be found in Berlin, almost one in every city quarter. The case most accurately examined during the fieldwork in Berlin was that of the Friedrichshainer Tauschring.



currency, most *Tauschringe* compute value by means of time units,<sup>13</sup> without regard to the qualification required to provide a service or to produce a good. This is justified as a way of giving the same opportunities to every participant, irrespective of their social status: just the opposite of what happens in the labour market.

More precisely, *Tauschringe* are exchange networks where people provide services to each other – and, less often, goods – without the mediation of a currency. Participation consists on putting one's abilities at the network's disposal, and members are also expected to request what they need or wish. In this sense, the global activity of the network is somewhat similar to a supply and demand dynamic.

In principle, quantification is at play in these initiatives. What is given and what is received must be kept in balance according to a notion of value that, in most cases, is supposed to be independent from the exchange value that would prevail in the market. It is so, for example, as time units are valued in the same way irrespective of the qualification needed.

Offers and demands are published in the *Tauschring's* magazine or website. The most frequent exchanges involve services such as repairs, classes, help with removals, care of dependent people, haircuts, translations, Internet searches, transportation, etc. But there are also more imprecise offers: for example, a member of the Friedrichshainer Tauschring offers 'personal advice in crisis and life situations' (in <[www.tauschring-friedrichshain.de/2007/10/03/neues-mitglied-im-september-brigitte](http://www.tauschring-friedrichshain.de/2007/10/03/neues-mitglied-im-september-brigitte)>).

Transactions are computed and recorded in a database. The provider and the receiver of a service get a positive and a negative record in their respective personal accounts. Members are expected to keep a certain balance between their giving and their receiving actions, so that their personal accounts remain not too far from zero. In some *Tauschringe*, inferior and superior limits are set in order to prevent deviant behaviours. All these requirements concerning the equal value of the transacted goods and services generate a certain amount of bureaucracy which may eventually give way to the creation of jobs to be remunerated in the *Tauschring's* own units. Usually, a core of activists gets involved in coordination tasks, while mere users participate only through their individual acts of exchange. Activists, however, sometimes complain about people's lack of participation and engagement, which they attribute to an 'I-want-something-for-free mentality' (Ute, activist in the Friedrichshainer Tauschring, 19-10-2005) and to attitudes acquired through the experience in the market, such as the fear of debts, the calculation of individual benefit, the comparison with market prices or the tendency to economise.

13 They often speak about *Lebenszeit* ('life time') units, and often name them after some peculiarity of the neighbourhood involved.

In addition to the exchange of services, some *Tauschringe* organise markets where second-hand and self-made objects also circulate. These are occasions in which members can meet and share their leisure time in a festive manner.<sup>14</sup> The collaboration in organising such events may also be remunerated in the *Tauschring*'s units.

Among different *Tauschringe*, differences can be noticed regarding the stress on economic or on social targets and the definition of exchange units and value equivalences. This on-going discussion, pointed out by Pierret (1999),<sup>15</sup> became evident as well during the federal meeting of German *Tauschringe* in October 2005 in Berlin.<sup>16</sup> But, in any case, all of them intend to a certain extent to promote economic transactions based on the mutual recognition and help between neighbours. This should result in a more spontaneous circulation of resources and in a thickening of community life, as an activist stated: 'The social aspect is strengthened in 'Tauschringe' by means of community action. The contact is very important, you meet people with different ages, in the neighbourhood, in the 'Kiez', very concretely, old and young people, sick and healthy...' (Ute, activist in the Friedrichshainer Tauschring, 19-10-2005).

When they enter the ring, relations among participants have a contractual form, as people are theoretically on an equal basis and freely agree to exchange (Supiot 2000). However, it is usually intended to create social bonds and reciprocity in a specific local context where the adverse socioeconomic conditions may have eroded the community. *Tauschringe* aim at integrating disadvantaged groups in contexts where a socioeconomic polarisation is taking place:

What does a *Tauschring* provide?

- Neighbourhood help: The exchange between people in the neighbourhood provides contact among neighbours.
- Economic self-help: By means of the *Tauschring*, you can get goods and services that you cannot afford, or that are difficult to get, as for example babysitting or help with certain tasks.
- Creativity: People can join the community in an active manner, where they can apply their abilities and what they enjoy doing in a useful and conscious way, without the pressure of the labour market (Tauschringe Berlin's leaflet, january 2005; see also <<http://trb.tauschring-mitte.de>>).

14 It is also an opportunity to announce the *Projekt* to potential new members, as it happens in the monthly *Tauschrausch* ('exchange fever') organised by the Kreuzberger Tauschring (Strassenkreuzer 98, april 2004; Info-pack Kreuzberger Tauschring, in <[www.tauschring-kreuzberg.de](http://www.tauschring-kreuzberg.de)>).

15 'We can see two trends among exchange rings nowadays [...]: those with a more economic discourse, who present themselves as representatives of the 'free economy' movement ('*Freiwirtschaft*') based on Gesell's theories, and the others who commit themselves to the social functions of 'Tauschringe' and declare to be inspired by Canadian experiences' (Pierret 1999: 6, translated from French).

16 See *Strassenkreuzer*, 114, november 2005: 4.

Unemployed people, for instance, are supposed to be given an opportunity to become more independent from the formal economic sector, where their disadvantage is most likely to be perpetuated, as they got engaged in mutual help networks based on neighbourhood relations. This would be an opportunity for them to take advantage of resources and abilities that tend to be turned down by product and labour markets.

One of the basic assumptions underlying this conception of *Tauschringe* is that socially connected people have better chances for survival and for well-being. The similarity between this idea and that of social capital (Bourdieu 1980), even if the notion is not explicit in activists' and participants' discourses, is considerable. *Tauschringe*, understood as a self-help modality and a means of civic engagement, are conceived to promote social participation. This should allow people to enlarge their social networks, to access resources, both material and immaterial, and to satisfy in this way their needs and wishes. Once they are engaged with the *Projekt*, the effective transfers should modify and reinforce the underlying social relations, as in the Maussian theory of the gift (Mauss 1979 [1923-24]). This economic behaviour is socially embedded (Polanyi 1994 [1977]; 2001 [1944]), and entails values other than profit-seeking and individual competition. This is well illustrated by this exchange situation:

As soon as I got to G.'s home, I could see the first decorated candles and homemade doilies. G. invited me to go in and to have a sit. She is very communicative and asked me immediately what I do and how I intend to do it. Once she has started to talk, G. won't stop any more. She explained me the different techniques and always showed me an example [...].

G. loves to explain things and to give assistance so that you can do it better. She crochets and knits trendy scarves and socks. She had already made some scarves for 'Tauschring' members. She makes jewellery as well, for example necklaces. She has all kinds of materials. She also advises about where to buy good wool and has many magazines with knitting patterns.

As I said goodbye to her, I had many ideas in mind about what beautiful things I can do. As Christmas approaches, my visit to G. has suggested me to do some handicrafts again or to apply the napkin technique with G.'s aid (Friedrichshainer Tauschring's website, <[www.tauschring-friedrichshain.de/2007/11/23/gerdas-kreativstuebchen](http://www.tauschring-friedrichshain.de/2007/11/23/gerdas-kreativstuebchen)>).

Indeed, this visit to G. implied much more than an impersonal transaction, as it set up the foundations for further encounters and involved a considerable affective load.

Despite the *Tauschring*'s social aims, participants do not necessarily belong to the most disadvantaged social sectors.<sup>17</sup> This can be due to the fact that members conceive their participation as a strategy to develop their social network rather than as a way to access essential resources for survival. At the same time, they view it as an opportunity to enjoy some little 'luxuries' that they could not afford – or would not be willing to spend money on – in the conventional market. A very committed participant expressed herself in this way: 'There are so many things that you can get in the *Tauschring*, like massages and so on, that you do not strictly need, but they just make life more beautiful' (Ute, activist in the Friedrichshainer Tauschring, 19-10-2005).

In this regard, an activist distinguished the *Tauschring* movement in Germany from that of the barter markets that emerged during the Argentinean economic crisis:

The reason why people exchange is that they get to meet new people, they do something meaningful, they learn about it... These are not the needy people. Not like in Argentina, where people could only survive with a barter market. It was an emergency situation over there, but here has to do with social communication (Wilhelm, self-help activist, 20-10-2005).

Instead of subsistence strategies, social participation, a meaningful use of spare time and the identification with the local community seem to be here the main issues. As Pierret puts it:

What is sought after by joining a *Tauschring* is contact above all, the reconstruction of a social bond, the integration in a social network, which is usually more defective in the city than in the country (1999: 5, translated from French).

But the effects of actual inequalities should not be neglected. Going back to Bourdieu's notion of social capital (1980), the equating potential of *Tauschringe* could be constrained by people's differential ability to effectively mobilize and access resources, as social capital is strongly dependent on other kinds of capital, such as the economic one.

### **Projekte based on gift-giving: the example of Umsonstläden**

Gift-giving (*schenken*) Projekte are inspired by radical attitudes against capitalism and the market. Balance in exchange is not aimed at: there are only

17 Our intuition in this regard, based on fieldwork observations, is confirmed by Gerometta's quantitative data for the Friedrichshainer Tauschring, where participants' income did not differ from the district's average (1999: 54-55).

people who give or who receive, or who do both, but, in any case, giving does not entail a repayment expectation, and receiving does not generate a debt. Such *Projekte* also exist in the Internet,<sup>18</sup> but we will focus here in the so-called *Umsonstläden* ('free shops'). The 'shops' simply consist on a built space where users can leave objects that they do not need or want any more, and they can likewise take away what has been left by others.<sup>19</sup>

In accordance to all this, the *Umsonstladen* located in the Eastern district of Mitte, where the ethnographic quest took place, is a self-managed,<sup>20</sup> anti-capitalist and ecologist *Projekt* that intends to subvert the principle of market exchange. It remains deliberately independent from any source of public funding and relies only on donations.<sup>21</sup> The activists took the idea from an already existing 'shop' in Hamburg, organised by the *Arbeitskreise Lokale Ökonomie* ('working groups on local economy') since 1998. But there was at least another antecedent in West Berlin's 'alternative scene' during the 80s: a 'Gratisverein' ('free of charge association') promoted by squatters in Charlottenburg. About thirty *Umsonstläden* exist nowadays all over Germany.<sup>22</sup>

The anti-capitalist ideological background of the *Umsonstladen* is very salient in the activists' discourses:

The 'free shop' offers a starting point to deprive the ruling logic of the seemingly fair conditions of exchange and possession of its power. In this society in which the unfairness and exploitation is transfigured to a natural state, practical solidarity and self-organization can be the beginning on the way to liberation. Liberation from the forces of a money economy. Liberation from the forces of labour. Liberation from the violent conditions of consumerism ('Long live the free-shop', leaflet, Berlin, no date, original in English).

Thus, it is intended to create a sphere where anyone can satisfy its needs on an equal basis and where no hierarchy based on income, employment or status is generated.

In addition, environmentalist aims are at play. The re-use of resources is encouraged as a way of reducing waste and of counteracting over-production

18 See, for example, <[www.alles-und-umsonst.de](http://www.alles-und-umsonst.de)>.

19 'Freeboxes' are another type of *schenken* experiences. They consist on shelves placed in some meeting points of the *alternative Szene* where everyone can leave or take objects from.

20 Self-management is a way of remaining independent from the State and the market, in a context where social initiatives, many of them related to the squatting scene from the 80s and the 90s, have been coopted by the local State and transformed into legal organisations such as cooperatives (Sabaté 2008).

21 The only source of funding is a tin where users may leave a donation.

22 See <[www.umsonstladen.de](http://www.umsonstladen.de)> for a list.

and over-consumption, which are considered to be the key aspects of the capitalist system.

Today, every person in Germany still produces half a ton of household trash per year. This includes not only the packaging material but more and more also commodities and pieces of equipment. From toasters to vacuum cleaners, from old computers to clothes from the last season, more and more useful things are ending up in the trash can – a product of our affluent society.

Contrary to what happens in charity and welfare institutions, in the *Umsonstladen* there is no target group to whom the *Projekt* is addressed. This is explicitly argued as a condition to avoid stigmatisation and exclusion, and to dignify the act of receiving something for free without being labelled as *bedürftig* ('needy'):

The 'Projekt' here is in fact open to everyone, and no one needs to prove that he or she is a needy person. There are people who come in and ask: must I prove that I am a recipient of social benefits or something like that? They are used to the State, they have to do it over there. Here everything is open (Inge, *Umsonstladen* activist, 7-10-2005).

The infrastructure of the 'shop' is minimal: a squatted ground floor furnished with shelves. A diversity of goods can be found there: clothes, books, records, toys, shoes, household items, small pieces of furniture, accessories for babies, small appliances, etc. In addition, services and bulky objects (not allowed in the shop) are offered and demanded on a notice board. A small group of collaborators take turns keeping the shop and informing users about a few utilisation rules. The most prominent of these rules is the so-called *Drei-Teile-Regel* (three-piece rule), which allows a maximum of three objects to be taken away. The giving behaviour is also regulated: only objects in good condition are accepted in the 'shop'.<sup>23</sup>

Some of the activists take on very seriously the task of explaining to visitors the ideological foundations of the *Projekt* and of inviting them to think about their 'true' needs and about their relationship with things and money before taking something away. This stimulus for reflection is stressed by activists as being the main difference between the *Umsonstladen* and a conventional shop:

So for me it was always something symbolic, something like a shock for people who wonder, 'Hey, how does it work here?'. To make them reflect about needs, that was important for me, that the people wonder what they

23 A third kind of limitations has to do with the content of the materials they receive: 'We only discard books that shouldn't be propagated further, that is to say, nazi propaganda or pornography' (Inge, *Umsonstladen* activist, 7-10-2005).



need and what they don't need. They make themselves the question when they bring something, what do I need, what do I not need any more. And they should make these questions in the shop as well, when they have to decide between specific objects, and between specific needs. And they do not have abstract prices standing before the thing, that's to say, they cannot compare abstract prices as it always happens in this economy: everything is valued in abstract money. But here, what decides is the specific thing and the specific need. I always wanted to introduce this reflection in people... about needs (Inge, *Umsonstladen* activist, 7-10-2005).

However, activists often miss a real transformation in the attitude of many users in this regard:

Capitalism is not completely abandoned. Not only because people meet us with their look totally fixated on the thing, just as we can see in a store. No. They value things of course depending in their monetary value and most of them do not think about the purposes of the promoters of this unusual 'Projekt'. Ideally, they do not leave the 'capitalist sector' until they strike up a discussion with us about the sense and the intention of the 'free shop' (Herrmann 2005).<sup>24</sup>

Despite the theoretical non-existence of a target group of users, a closer look reveals some interesting features. First, there tends to be people who only give, people who only take away, and people who alternate these two practices. For activists, only this third group is fully identified with the goals of the *Projekt*, while the other two would be making a partial and distorted use of the *Umsonstladen*, either to get rid of junk – as they would do in a recycling plant – or to economise by obtaining something for free – as from a charity institution or from welfare benefits. This results, for example, in a very typical case of 'deviant' behaviour, in a context where second-hand shops and flea markets are extremely popular and are central to many people's free time activities (Sabaté 2006): 'In the great group of the 'only recipients' are people who like searching for bargains. They would probably do the same in a second-hand market' (Inge, *Umsonstladen* activist, 7-10-2005).

In addition, even if it is explicitly forbidden, there are also people selling in the second-hand market who provide themselves with commodities from the *Umsonstladen*. Such behaviour is denounced in the *Projekt*'s written materials, but in practice not much can be done against it unless limitations to access the shop are set up, which would contradict the openness of the *Umsonstladen*:

24 The author is an activist in the *Umsonstladen Mitte*.



We have experienced the strength of the dominant value system and how competitive thinking is embedded in many people (often in us as well). A lot of people understand the word 'for free' from a bargain-mentality, that is to say: to live even cheaper at the expense of others [...]. This way of thinking has nothing to do with a self-determined life and the idea of an economy based on solidarity (Netzwerk Gratisökonomie 2005).<sup>25</sup>

Another fundamental feature of the *Projekt* is the anonymity of most participants and the lack of contact among them, and between most users and the 'shopkeepers'.<sup>26</sup> The donor and the recipient of an object hardly ever meet,<sup>27</sup> and thus it cannot be said that goods circulate on pre-existing social relations, that objects circulating produce social relations, or that donors and recipients belong to a same social group. This undermines the possibility of a cooperative way of thinking:

People who bring things don't always think about the people for whom these things are. You can see that when the thing is broken [...]. Those are people who only think about themselves and about their relation to that thing they can't throw away. They construct an alibi: perhaps someone could still use it. But they don't think about a specific person who could really use it. If they thought about that, they would realize immediately, that this person doesn't exist. At least in our society, an affluent society, it's very unlikely, that someone takes a t-shirt without a sleeve, for example (Inge, *Umsonstladen* activist, 7-10-2005).

The creation of social bonds and the reinforcement of sociability are not central purposes of the *Projekt*, although some activities such as discussions and workshops have been organised in this aim. The *Umsonstladen*'s main goal is rather to put at the public's disposal a space where they can find what they need and leave what they do not need any more. And then, the framework of the *Projekt* and the intervention of activists in this giving-and-taking dynamic should provide these actions with a political meaning by questioning people's

25 Netzwerk Gratisökonomie is a network of several *schchenken Projekte*.

26 It is also interesting to point out that the most frequent users of the 'shop' are the activists themselves, who conform indeed a group in itself. They have a privileged access to newly arrived objects suiting their needs or those of their friends. These goods are put aside before they even reach the shelves of the *Umsonstladen*. However, this behaviour is restricted to avoid a potential abuse.

27 An exception to this could be observed during the ethnographic fieldwork: two girls who were about to enter the shop with a trolley containing several objects were asked by a man sitting on the pavement if they would give them the guitar they were carrying. They agreed, and a short conversation took place before the man left with the guitar and the the girls took the rest of the objects into the *Umsonstladen*.

relationship to things, in the hope that such questioning will undermine their capitalist way of thinking about needs and value.

#### DISCUSSION: BEYOND THE CLASSICAL DICHOTOMY

Within the general panorama of the organised alternatives to market consumption, *Tauschringe* and *Umsonstläden* represent different aspirations. While the former retain the logic of balance in exchange and promote a notion of value based on time, the latter aim at creating a radically new kind of economic relations where the search for individual benefit and the calculation of equivalences should no longer be at play: only people's needs should count.

The operation of *Tauschringe* is more intelligible for non-politicised participants, who can easily agree with the value accorded to time, work and effort. But becoming a member demands from them a certain degree of engagement as they need to become formal members. In contrast to this, the more radical nature of *Umsonstläden* generates scepticism,<sup>28</sup> but these 'shops' can also be used in a pragmatic, sporadic way as users do not need to prove their political identification with the activists' initial conception.

At first glance, it may seem that *Tauschringe* and *Umsonstläden* promote two distinct circulation patterns: that of exchanging and that of giving away. An immediate reaction would be to match them to the models of market-like balanced exchange and of gift-giving respectively. Indeed, roughly considered, non-monetary exchanges occurring in *Tauschringe*, where a restoration of balance and a means of exchange are at play, seem much closer to the logic of market mechanisms than disinterested gift-giving practices taking place in *Umsonstläden*, where the calculation of value and the obligation to repay are left aside.

Nevertheless, Carrier (1995: 18) warns against the search for pure examples either of gifts or commodities in the empirical reality. For him, it is more appropriate to take these notions as analytical tools or as the poles in a continuum (1995: 190). Indeed, none of the two *Projekte* considered here fit completely what anthropologists have defined as gift-giving and commodity exchange. Following Gregory's conception of the gift, for example, neither in *Tauschringe* nor in *Umsonstläden* do we usually find 'relations between non-alienable things' (1997: 52). And what he understands by commodity relations, 'relations between alienable things', does not totally apply to our cases either. As a result, the mixed features of the *Projekte*'s distinct circulation patterns require further analysis.

28 Many people, at hearing the term 'free shop', automatically deny that this idea can work, as they infer that such a shop would be immediately looted. The social representation of Sahlins' negative reciprocity (1983 [1974]) seems to be present here.

### *Commodities after gifts?*

From a historical viewpoint, the gift and the commodity form have been more or less prevalent in different moments. As described above, the commodity form prevailed with the triumph of the formal meaning of the economy over the substantive one in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Polanyi 2001 [1944]). In this sense, both *Tauschringe* and *Umsonstläden* entail attempts at counteracting the market rule in a capitalist city, where the commodity logic has become largely hegemonic. Under this hegemony, the accessibility of goods and services is determined by a supply-demand-price dynamic that excludes the most unprivileged from the access to resources. In response, the *Projekte* intend to provide alternatives for the satisfaction of needs and, by means of very different strategies, try to relate again economic transactions to material, socially situated needs. This can be understood as an effort to re-embed the economy in the social fabric, as Polanyi said it was the case for societies that lacked an autonomous realm for economic institutions (Polanyi 1994 [1977]: 89). An evolutionary discourse is evoked here, and this is particularly salient when the *Projekte* are presented as resistance strategies in front of a teleological spread of the market. This kind of discourse is strongly present in *Tauschringe* and *Umsonstläden*, as it is in many other initiatives inspired by the social economy. Apart from the authors best known for their commitment to socialist utopias and experiments, like Owen or Proudhon, also Mauss' final sections of *The Gift* entail a political agenda in this sense:

Thus we can and must return to archaic society and to elements in it. We shall find in this reasons for life and action that are still prevalent in certain societies and numerous social classes: the joy of public giving; the pleasure in generous expenditure on the arts, in hospitality, and in the private and public festival (1979 [1923-24], English translation 2002: 88-89).

But, despite the general agreement about the importance of situating economic practices in their historical context (Thomas 1991: 9), and assuming that the scope of market rule has grown much in the last two centuries (Carrier 1995), gifts and commodities cannot be merely matched to subsequent historical phases, for they are not mutually excluding at any given moment (Carrier 1995: 18). Instead, they are deeply interwoven in contemporary consumption experiences, be it in post-colonial contexts (Thomas 1991) or in the West (Carrier 1995: 38).

From a diachronic viewpoint, the same objects may be successively commodified and de-commodified by entering and exiting the market (Appadurai 1986). Thus, an object laying on the *Umsonstladen*'s shelves may have been a commodity in the past, as the former owner purchased it and, consequently, appropriated it as his or her singular possession, at least for a while. Afterwards, if someone takes this object away and sells it in a flea market, it

will enter another exchange sphere where its singularity will be threatened by its exchangeability (Kopytoff 1986). Similarly, the skills of a retired or an unemployed *Tauschring* member could be a part of his or her former professional qualification. As such, these skills used to be put up for sale as commodities in the realm of labour work. Now, as this person decides to offer them in a non-monetary basis, a certain degree of de-commodification takes place. This is especially so whenever people prioritize social contact over pragmatic self-interest in exchanges, or when participants decide not to record transactions any more as a result of the personalisation of their relationship. In this way, the bonds linking people to objects loose centrality in comparison with the bonds between people (Gregory 1982: 41). Thus, the short-term outcomes of specific exchanges will not be so important for actors as the long-term consequences of their mutual dependence and support (Parry and Bloch 1989: 23).

As boundaries are so ambiguous, it may also happen that, at a given moment and place, goods simultaneously contain gift and commodity traits, due to their inscription in personal relations (Carrier 1995: 10). This hybrid nature is especially salient when circulation takes place outside the market sphere, or in a marginalised position within it, even if circulation takes a monetary form<sup>29</sup> or if the return of an equivalent value is somehow expected.

Drawing on the idea of a multicentric economy with separated but inter-related spheres, as proposed by Parry and Bloch (1989), Carrier (1995) and Gudeman (2001), *Tauschringe* and *Umsonstläden* intend to act in the home/community realm, where long-term transactions aiming at social reproduction take place. Indeed, it is the *Projekte*'s purpose to grow apart from labour work and from a market sphere where competition, profit and accumulation are the main motives. Accordingly, objects and services are not standardised, and value is not related to prices fixed through supply and demand mechanisms. Their exchangeability is limited by taking into account their use value over their exchange value, and so the singularity of each good or service is stressed. Organizers of both *Tauschringe* and *Umsonstläden* declare their intention to promote a realm where people can fulfil their needs without being impelled to use money. The individual search for profit and maximisation should play here a minimum role and be replaced by a morality based on solidarity and mutual recognition, similar to that of generalised reciprocity (Sahlins 1983 [1974]). Therefore, activists stress the difference between 'alternative' *Projekte* and the second-hand market. Especially in the *Tauschring* example, the participants' social involvement with each other is a central goal of the organisers.

29 Herrmann (1997) and Crewe and Gregson (1998) have also showed that gift-like 'anomalies' can appear even in monetary contexts like car boot sales. Indeed, following Parry and Bloch (1989: 8), money is not the main element for the definition of the capitalist market, because it also existed in precapitalist societies, and because the 'moral economy' is not automatically destroyed by it.

As a result, and also due to the absence of a currency, goods and services transferred in *Tauschringe* and *Umsonstläden* may seem completely de-commodified. But a closer examination reveals the inaccuracy of this statement.

### *Gift and commodity ingredients*

An important difference has been pointed out between the two *Projekte* regarding their intention to generate social bonds. In *Tauschringe*, where the process of becoming a member is strongly institutionalised, an 'artificial' community with clear boundaries is delimited. At first sight, paradoxically, the well-defined rules concerning book-keeping make self-interested behaviours possible as people, in rendering a service, may be only motivated by the possibility of accessing further resources in turn. In this context, bargaining may take place, and, for example, the market price of the materials involved in a service may be taken into account to negotiate value. In this sense, giving something to another *Tauschring* member would not be different from working in order to buy something with the resulting earnings, as one would do in the market realm (Gudeman 2001).

Nevertheless, it is reported that, for frequent participants, transactions become more disinterested as they get to know each other and establish friendship-like relationships. Motivations become less centred on the transacted object and are reoriented towards the social encounter with the other. Ideally, this would give rise to the foundation of a community of mutually dependent individuals. The obligations and responsibilities ruling their behaviour would precede self-interest and would aim at maintaining the community itself. In Gudeman's words, relationships among *Tauschring* members would exist 'for its own sake' (2001: 10) and would be locally and specifically constituted, in contrast with the impersonality of the market realm. This means that, in a way, the most successful implementation of a *Tauschring* would occur when the formal logic of balanced exchange is replaced by socially defined values. Indeed, this is the case for some very committed members, like the woman who was in charge of the Friedrichshainer *Tauschring*'s coordination for some years. She decided to take on this task on a voluntary basis, as she felt somehow responsible for the *Projekt* after its founder, a close friend of hers, died. For several years, she did not regularly add to her personal account all the time she invested in coordination, buy only a small part of it.

Thus, it is true that the most active participants eventually get involved in disinterested mutual help practices with each other. As people remain in the network after every specific transaction, relations tend to be reinforced after every encounter and acquire a long-term meaning which links them to social reproduction (Parry and Bloch 1989: 23). The supposedly contractual, free decisions taken by people in their first transactions may turn into commitment with other participants as they become socially closer. Going back to G.'s case, she may get involved in the other person's preparations for Christmas not

only by committing herself to help making handicrafts, but also by sharing the excitement of the whole process. The notion of *Lebenszeit* ('life time') as a measure of value achieves here its full sense, as it connotes, at least in a symbolical way, a denial of the transaction's commoditised aspects. People rendering a service are supposed to be giving away a unique part of themselves as they accept to share a responsibility with the other participant.

Nevertheless, this construction of social bonds tends to be restricted to one-to-one relations, while a person's binding to the whole group of members may remain as loose and impersonal as it was in the beginning, even if parties and barter markets are organised to intensify community feelings among participants. Therefore, there is no construction of 'community' in Gudeman's sense, but merely of personal bonds.

Maximising attitudes can also be detected in members whose only motivation to participate is the opportunity to get services cheaper than in the market. Even if such participants do not share the spirit of the *Projekt*, it does not mean that their behaviour infringes the *Tauschring* norms, for there is also scope for self-interested transactions within them. Only if they fail to respect the norms are they warned, for example when someone holds a very negative account as a result of a predatory behaviour. Solidarity is clearly not at play in such a case.

In contrast, as membership is not required in *Umsonstladen* and participants do not know each other, every giving or taking action is individually decided, and independent from previous and future actions. Thus, transactions are not intended for the social reproduction of a potential community of users (Gudeman 2001). They just result from individual decisions motivated, in the case of militant participants, by shared ideologies, and, for many others, by utilitarian reasons such as the need to make room at home or to obtain a useful or attractive object. As people taking away one of these objects will not get indebted and nothing will force them to reciprocate, individual autonomy seems to be preserved indefinitely. Motivations may be diverse, matching or not the *Projekt*'s spirit, but they are not supposed to be determined by the social relations in which participants are inscribed.<sup>30</sup>

Although it is apparent that *Umsonstladen* transactions cannot be said to occur in the market realm either, some similarities between *Umsonstladen* users and consumers at the marketplace may be traced. The latter, according to the *homo oeconomicus* conception, choose the products they need or wish, managing

30 But some *Umsonstladen* activists hold that, even if people using the 'shop' do not get to know each other, they share ideological and moral values which bind them together in an abstract manner. For instance, they disapprove of the profit motive, criticise material accumulation, claim for austerity and generosity, and reject capitalist values and goals such as over-production, over-consumption or private property. However, it is resignedly admitted that not every *Umsonstladen* participant shares this ideology. More pragmatic attitudes are tolerated. As in *Tauschringe*, only people with blatantly 'deviant' behaviours (like contravening the *drei-Teile-Regel*) are prevented from participating.



their purchase power in a rational way, and dispose of commodities as soon as they do not find them useful or attractive any more.<sup>31</sup> As in the market, *Umsonstläden* users are not forced to keep on participating: without further justification, they may never enter the 'shop' again, as commitment to the *Projekt* is not a pre-condition for participation.

In *Umsonstläden*, direct contact between transactors does not usually occur: impersonality and anonymity are the rule.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, users of the 'shop' are expected not to turn up too often, as a regular visitor may even be suspected of acting compulsively or of reselling in the second-hand market. According to all this, the act of appropriation seems not to be different from that of taking home a piece of furniture that has been abandoned on a sidewalk. Goods transacted in *Umsonstläden* have equally lost their personal meaning, as they are completely alienated in the sense pointed out by Thomas (1991: 39): alienation of a thing is its dissociation from producers, former users, or prior context. As a result, these objects will continue to travel along their path, and their former owners will not have an influence on the subsequent phases of the object's social life (Appadurai 1986).

This is why *Umsonstläden* goods, even if they cannot be equated to 'pure' commodities circulating in the market, do not fully fit the Maussian definition of the gift either, as transactors are mutually independent and cannot be said to be conditioned by shared moral obligations to give, to receive and to reciprocate. In addition, objects do not contribute to create social relations between transactors or within a 'sharing community'. But we can still call them 'gifts' provided that we do it in the sense proposed in the following section.

### *'Indian gifts' in Berlin*

So, how can we define transferences occurring in a self-proclaimed non-market (or even anti-market) context, but where reciprocation is not expected and transactors do not even meet? Thomas' (1991) and Laidlaw's (2000: 618) remarks against Gregory's simplification of the gift as the opposite of the commodity are particularly pertinent if we are to shed light on this case. In order to face this complexity, we will now resort to the notion of 'pure gift', as proposed by Parry (1986),<sup>33</sup> and that of 'free gift' outlined by Laidlaw (2000).

31 In a context of material over-abundance like Berlin, owning many things is not *per se* something positive. It can also be annoying, as objects become quickly obsolete and out of fashion, and take up much space at home. Environmentally conscious people and those feeling uncomfortable with over-consumption can be relieved at discovering how to get rid of still-useful things. *Umsonstläden* become thus another option to dispose of such objects, together with charity institutions or recycling plants.

32 Except in two kinds of situations: the rendering of services, which is rare, and the donations of bulky goods requiring the recipient's visit to the giver's home.

33 The homonym category sketched by Malinowski (2001 [1922]) had met Mauss' objections and remained unexamined in *The Gift* (Laidlaw 2000: 617, 627).



For Parry (1986: 453), ‘the ideology of ‘pure’ gift is inseparable from the ideology of the purely interested individual pursuit of utility’. Indeed, as someone decides to use the *Umsonstladen* on the basis of their needs or wishes – and irrespective of the moral considerations about what a ‘true’ need or a ‘legitimate’ wish is –, they might aim at maximising utility to the same extent as they do whenever they purchase in a store or sell in the flea market. What is clearly not at play here is Mauss’ idea of an actor exchanging on behalf of moral persona, because of his or her social position, and obligated by a previous history of transactions (1986: 456). What occurs in *Umsonstladen* would be closer to what Parry designates as ‘the Indian gift’ (1986: 463), if we abstract it from its religious context and transport it to our ethnographic case. Indeed, the object is completely alienated from the donor, there is no obligation to give back, and the transaction does not inaugurate or reinforce a social relation between participants. For Parry, the ‘Indian gift’ denies the ubiquity of the norm of reciprocity and allows to consider a category of gifts not considered in *The Gift*: those not expecting any kind of reciprocation, not even an increase in donors’ social prestige within their community, as it happens with the Indian *dana* (Laidlaw 2000: 622-624). This is also the case in an anonymous setting like the *Umsonstladen*, where bringing an object is supposed to be a completely disinterested action.

Nevertheless, some users and activists talk about the abstract pleasure of satisfying someone else’s needs or wishes, and present their giving behaviour as an altruistic gesture towards unknown others. They represent the *Umsonstladen* sphere as completely opposed to that of the market, where individual interest is the only motive. This discourse claiming for the preservation – or the reinvention – of a moral economic realm in front of the impersonal, exploiting market rule is most recurrent in the contemporary Western *Zeitgeist*, and results from a progressive disaggregation of the modern forms of gift and commodity (Laidlaw 2000: 627). For Carrier (1995: 145), this entails the construction of ‘a cultural image of the perfect gift’: something priceless, freely given, with no return expectation, and entailing no obligations for the receiver.<sup>34</sup>

According to Carrier, the construction of the gift – located in the community realm – as radically opposed to the commodity – located in the market realm – derives paradoxically from the capitalist ideology itself. In contemporary contexts, where economy and society are disembedded, non-capitalist economic logics are restricted to spheres such as the household or, as in our case, the specific experiments of social movements. In turn, these marginal spheres tend to be redefined as a total negation of the market logic, which results in the so-called ‘ideology of the gift’ (Carrier 1995) or of the ‘pure gift’

34 Only the affective expression included in Carrier’s definition would not be fully applicable in *Umsonstladen*’s case.

(Parry 1986), where donors' voluntarism and self-consciousness are stressed (Carrier, 1995: 21-22), while the smallest trace of interest in the act of giving is completely discarded.<sup>35</sup> As Parry puts it,

In our kind of society, gifts come to *represent* something entirely different. *Gift-exchange* – in which persons and things, interest and disinterest are merged – has been fractured, leaving gifts *opposed* to exchange, persons *opposed* to things and interest to disinterest. The ideology of a disinterested gift emerges in parallel with an ideology of a purely interested exchange (1986: 458).

The author pursues his argument by stating that 'those who make free and unconstrained contracts in the market also make free and unconstrained gifts outside it' (Parry 1986: 466). According to this, far from understanding *Umsonstläden* and the market realm as two watertight compartments, it is worth to examine their articulation, both from a material and from an ideological viewpoint. First, most of the goods exposed on the shelves have been produced for their commercialization and, therefore, under market constraints. Moreover, as described above, some of them will even be reintroduced in the second-hand market. Second, and most interestingly, the very ideological foundation of the *Projekt* mirrors in fact the capitalist hegemony, as the individual's autonomous decisions are stressed as much as they are in the market.

#### CONCLUSION: COUNTERACTING THE MARKET RULE

The ethnographic materials presented here have showed that neither *Tauschringe* nor *Umsonstläden* approaches, two distinct attempts to promote non-market economic relations, fully fit the Maussian notion of the gift. As an interpretation of the gift as completely opposed to the commodity, in the way suggested by Gregory (1982; 1997), could not take our analysis much further, we have pointed out the need for a closer examination of the circulation patterns promoted by these *Projekte*.

Indeed, both experiences aim at a de-commodification of economic practices, as they have been deliberately located outside the market sphere by their promoters. In this sense, they stress use value over exchange value, recognise the importance of work taking place beyond the labour market boundaries and deal with needs and wishes that are not necessarily expressed as market demand.

However, even if they certainly belong to the community realm, they cannot be considered as genuine manifestations of the Maussian gift provided

<sup>35</sup> The same ideology inspires the ethic of disinterested giving promoted by Christian charity and by other religions (Parry 1986: 468; Laidlaw 2000: 627, 632).

that obligations – to take, to give away and to reciprocate – only potentially arise in *Tauschringe*, and are totally lacking in the *Umsonstläden*'s case. Besides, a superior status of the donor over the recipient, as described by Mauss (1979 [1923-24]: 204-205), would not be an acceptable outcome, provided that both *Projekte* are founded on an egalitarian ideology. The organisation of *Umsonstläden* explicitly aims at preventing the emergence of a hierarchy as participants are not asked to prove their 'needy' condition in order to take something away. Likewise, in *Tauschringe*, people's negative or positive accounts should not crucially affect their relative status or their ability to access further resources.

Despite their similarities, the *Projekte* differ in essential regards. It is true that, in both cases, participation does not strongly depend on previous social connexions or in the social positions of participants. But after some time, in the *Tauschring* case, a certain limitation of individual autonomy may result from repeated transactions, even if every decision on participation remains self-determined, and the network can be given up at any time. In this sense, a community-like moral framework is not to be completely attained, but some obligations, similar to those existing in less elective contexts such as the neighbourhood, may emanate from the demands and expectations of friends who are also participating. These are success stories in the *Tauschring* arena: its institutionalised, contractual structure intended for balanced exchange sometimes gives rise to disinterested gift-giving practices among the most committed participants.

We have tried to understand the *Umsonstläden* case by assuming Carrier's statement that, in our society, the gift is popularly represented as freely given and devoid of any expectation of compensation. The generation of obligations for the recipient is thus denied. According to this, in *Umsonstläden*, the modern tension between the longing for individual autonomy – an autonomous self – and the wish to create dependence and obligation while giving – a situated self (Carrier 1995: 147, 160) – is merged with a libertarian ideological inspiration. As a result, the *Umsonstläden* user personifies the 'disinterested stranger' aiming to contribute to the common good in an abstract manner rather than on the basis of actual social relations (Carrier 1995: 164).

The main goal of both kinds of *Projekte*, as specific experiences of the social economy, is to re-attach economic circulation to social needs by offering alternatives to market consumption. What has been examined here is the role of the gift and commodity notions in the definition of their goals and operation. But, to determine the extent of each *Projekt*'s particular success, a more in-depth consideration of their empirical application would be needed. Then, if it is confirmed that *Umsonstladen* users actually reconsider their understanding of needs, wishes and value, taking decisions without regard to market prices, and that the seek for social encounters prevails over calculation and self-interested motives for *Tauschring* participants, then these *Projekte* will have succeeded in counteracting to a certain extent the ubiquity of the market rule.

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Redes de intercâmbio e lojas gratuitas em Berlim: dádiva e mercadoria em experiências "alternativas" de consumo ♦ Irene Sabaté Muriel ♦ Universitat de Barcelona ♦ etnoirene@gmail.com

O artigo baseia-se numa etnografia de práticas de consumo "alternativas" nos bairros centrais da antiga Berlim-Leste. São aqui analisadas as redes de intercâmbio não monetário (*Tauschringe*) e as "lojas gratuitas" (*Umsonstläden*). As *Umsonstläden* são enquadradas pela ideologia contemporânea da dádiva "pura" (Parry 1986; Carrier 1995): os objectos são dados gratuitamente e totalmente alienados dos seus possuidores. Já as *Tauschringe*, por seu lado, induzem por vezes práticas de oferta que implicam obrigações mútuas, como consequência de trocas frequentes que aproximam socialmente os participantes. O material etnográfico apresentado põe em causa a adequação do binómio dádiva/mercadoria à análise dessas experiências, na medida em que diferentes modalidades de oferta se conjugam com tendências para a mercadorização. Face a essa complexidade, o artigo propõe uma revisão da análise do papel da dádiva em práticas de consumo "alternativas" promovidas pelos movimentos sociais em Berlim.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: antropologia económica, dádiva/mercadoria, redes de intercâmbio, "lojas gratuitas", consumo, economia social, movimentos sociais, Berlim.